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**Academician V. P. Vassilyev:
the Tibetan and Chinese languages, and the history of Buddhist philosophy**

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Instead of dwelling on Vassily Pavlovitch Vassilyev's biography, I would like to start with the political situation that was occurring during the years of his career. Then, Europe was terrified with the "yellow menace". The raids by the nomadic tribes had not yet been forgotten; the past terrors of TENGHIZ KHAN made intellectuals lose their sleep while the politicians noticed another threat represented by the Chinese and Japanese. The standing of the West in regard to Russia was ambiguous: some insisted that Russia was a part of "the yellow menace", others viewed it as a barrier protecting Europe against it. In Russia, the apocalyptic mood was shared by many scholars, writers, and philosophers; it would be sufficient to recall the names of V. Solovyev, A. Byely, or A. Block who were genuinely afraid of Siberia and foresaw the devastation approaching Russia from the East. The very word "Euroasia" was born during that very time when Russian political thinking seriously considered the idea of letting go a part of Siberia between the Baikal lake and the Pacific, turning it into a free-trade zone, and actually making it accessible for the Chinese with their products. Those irrational theories could emerge solely because neither Chinese politics, nor history, nor culture had been sufficiently studied. Therefore trips to China by Russian scholars became an urgency.

Vassily Pavlovitch Vassilyev was born in Nizhny Novgorod on February 20, 1818, into a family of a low-level clerk. As there were no prospectives for the boy to receive a high education, he entered a local school at the age of 6, but had to leave three years later in order to start working in a regional court of law as a copyist. In 1827, the financial situation of the family improved, and the father managed to return his son to the third grade, and later sent to lyceum which the boy finished in 1834. In the same year, he was admitted into the Department of History and Filology of Kazan University where he was taught by Professor G. M. Kovalevsky, one of the most prominent scholars of that time. The talented pupil graduated from University in 1837; in the same year he successfully defended his thesis and got a Candidate's degree in Mongolian literature. Vassilyev's first research dealt with one of Mahāyāna's most popular sūtras, "Sutra of Golden Light". At that time, Vassilyev based his study on the Mongolian translation from Tibetan. Professor Kovalevsky was tremendously proud of his pupil. Two years later, Vassilyev defended his dissertation "On the basics of Buddhist philosophy" and became a full-fledged Magister. In that study, he provided a detailed and substantiated analysis of pāramitā, a main concept in Mahāyāna. For the first time ever, a scholar managed to explain the meaning of "*śūnyatā*" ("Emptiness") based on Mongolian and Tibetan sources.

Due to his outstanding performance, Vassilyev got invited to join the Russian missionaries in Peking where he could study Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese. Vassilyev accepted, but demanded that he be given time to receive additional training, especially in Buddhism. That preparation took two years during which Vassilyev improved his knowledge of Sanskrit, Mongolian, and Buddhist philosophy. Even though Vassilyev's very first research papers proved the fact that Russia had acquired a new world-class scholar, they were never printed.

In 1840, Vassilyev and I. I. Zakharov left for Peking, full of hope and expectations. Vassilyev dreamed about studying Tibetan and Chinese sources of Mahāyāna Buddhism; besides this he was intrigued to learn about Central Asia itself with its people, languages, and literature. In Peking, he subsequently stayed for ten years without leaving the city even once; he mastered Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, and Manchurian, the languages at that time that were barely familiar to Europeans. However, those ten years of hard work were possibly Vassilyev's most difficult ones. The bosses of the Church Academy were notorious niggards whenever it regarded paying teachers; for the initial three years, there was no one to train the students in Tibetan. Vassilyev wrote: "Life was hard for this curious layman; he had to spend ten years, the best years in one's lifetime, locked inside the mission, to obey its headmaster who could easily appear an enemy of scholarly knowledge. For ten years, not a single European could be seen around, and even not a single Russian beside those with who I had arrived there. At that, one must remember that the Chinese did not allow more than ten people to come there at any given time ..." ¹ N. Ya. Bichurin concurred: money was slow to come. In order to eat, one had to sell something or other. Finally, Bichurin was degraded, tried, and sent home for theft. V. P. Vassilyev never mentioned hunger, but at the same time he never failed to write about his mood which later resulted in depression which he developed immediately upon his coming back to Russia. In his biography written and published by S. A. Vengerov, it read, "... for ten years, he had been burning inside, suffering while on the outside, he had to remain jovial and merry; nothing could be more unbearable than that humiliation which took the shape of recognition." For the rest of his long life, Vassilyev remembered those ten bitter years in Peking, the time full of disappointment and nostalgia.

S. F. Oldenburg repeatedly talked with Vassilyev following the latter's trip to Peking; he praised the fact that the scholar, despite the hard conditions, managed to learn so much. In China, Vassilyev had had no access to anything written by his European colleagues, but on the other hand, he always hated following in anyone's steps. Instead, he read the abundant sources in the original languages in which they had been written. Moreover, he preferred working alone sharing with nobody but Zakharov, his companion during the harsh years of training abroad. S. F. Oldenburg mentioned some of Vassilyev's peculiar traits: according to him, the scholar was a gloomy and lonesome skeptic, in other words, a highly non-standard person difficult to get through to. Having studied ancient Indian literature, he put a lot of known facts under a question mark; for instance, he doubted that Aśoka had lived in the 3rd century B.C. At the same time, he wrote a concise review about the most complicated Chinese treatises on Buddhism, translated

¹ P. E. Skatchkov. *Essays on the history of Chinese studies in Russia*. Moscow, 1977, pp. 401-406.

Tāranātha's "History of Buddhism" from Tibetan, deciphered itinerary of Syuan Tziang, a 7th-century Chinese pilgrim who had provided a load of valuable and truthful data concerning the standing of Buddhism in India. On the basis of a vast number of genuine Oriental sources, he hoped to rewrite the history of that religion with no regards to the multiple publications by his European colleagues-Buddhologists.

Russia disappointed him. Of the studies he had written and prepared for print, only two were ever published: "Buddhism, its dogma, history, and literature", part I (introduction) and "History of Buddhism in India by Daranata" (in Tibetan, Taranathi), part 3. In his preface to that study, Vassilyev listed all sources he had used: "The general review of Buddhism suggested here is but a tiny part of what I have written so far; it is little more than an introductory note to the treatises on which I have based my research, to the studies aimed at developing and substantiating the points which I have only briefly listed, sometimes as pure suggestions".² The rest has remained in Vassilyev's archives, as there was nobody going to sort his notes out and to publish them. There is no doubt that at the time, Vassilyev was the most prominent Buddhologist and expert in Oriental languages, but his experience was unneeded. In that regard, one can recall the words said by S. F. Oldenburg in 1918, on Vassilyev's 100th anniversary, "It is a grave feeling indeed which is experienced by whoever gets interested in the history of Russian science: abundant have been daring initiatives, deep thinking, exceptional talents, brilliant minds, even persistent work are certainly there. At the same time, all that results in nothing: there are numerous discontinued "first volumes" and "first issues". The Napoleonic-scale projects get dropped halfway, unfinished and unpublished manuscript have formed sky-high piles. In fact, what we presently see is a huge cemetery of unrealized dreams and discontinued beginnings. The young Russian science is actually only two centuries old, but its death list has grown a mile long ... These are sad words, but they are the only ones to be said today, at the moment when we honor the memory of Vassily Pavlovitch Vassilye".³

In his studies, Vassilyev became the first Russian to attempt a systematic review of Buddhist thinking in its development. Besides, he was one of the first scholars to declare the necessity of an adequate language required to describe Buddhist spiritualism, to choose the European analogs for Buddhist categories, among those such as "salvation", "vision", "holiness", "divine", "sin", etc.

His Buddhist studies were of a doubtlessly dogmatic nature. In his unpublished "Religions of the East", Vassilyev bluntly rejected all Indian sources. He did not believe that the Chinese civilization was old either. S. F. Oldenburg wrote, "His mind, cold and rational, could never accept those ideas which he considered impossible" (*ibid.*). He could write it: for 15 years, he had talked with Vassilyev about Buddhism. The latter still remained fascinated with that religion even though his primary interest frequently shifted towards Chinese. His publication in "Oriental religions: Confucianism, Buddhism, and

² *Buddhism, its dogma, history, and literature*, part 1, p. IV.

³ S. F. Oldenburg, "In memoriam of Vassily Pavlovitch Vassilyev." *Proceedings of the Imperial Academy of Sciences*, series VI, 1918, p. 538.

Daoism"⁴ contained extravagant suggestions: "Has mankind ever invented anything more daring ... than Buddhism which aspired to make a God inside every human and even of every living being? However, such it its true hope. One can only imagine a dirty beggar, barely clad, immoral, lewd, certainly ignorant and thoughtless, — who is ready to convince any naïve person that the latter is about to become a saint, a God, a Buddha in exchange for a simple donation, a lump of bread. Then, there emerges a feeling of terror, as the logical conclusion is that greedy deceit has no limits, like self-adoring naïveté"⁵.

In those years, Buddhism was undergoing further development. New scholars did not know Chinese, Tibetan, or Manchurian sources to the scale and depth comparable to Vassilyev's. Buddhology was changing. However, what Vassilyev had done was not forgotten. In 1890, P. Peterson, a British researcher, wrote, "Mr. Vassilyev's input was invaluable ... We can only perceive its magnitude if we imagine that the Greek Gospel lost for centuries or even forever were suddenly re-discovered in its translation into Gothic".⁶

Despite his misanthropy, Vassilyev kept in touch with his colleagues-Buddhologists, provided them with advice and help, sometimes instructions. He was never afraid of revealing his ideas. S. F. Oldenburg called him the founder of Russian Oriental studies. In his publications, Vassilyev was the first to develop a systematic approach towards Buddhist philosophy and the first scholar who ever thought about the correct way to describe Buddhist texts, to unify its concepts when a study was written in European language.

The largest and the most important study by Vassilyev is certainly his "Commentary upon Mahāvīyutpatti - alias - The Buddhist Lexicon"⁷ textologically based on the "Vyutpatti", Tibetan comment upon the Buddhist canon to which the tradition refers as "Mahāvīyutpatti". It is in fact a list of Buddhist terms, proper names, those of plants and animals, etc. Vassilyev's task was enormous: he undertook the job to provide all 9565 entries with the comments borrowed from the main Tibetan and Chinese studies of Buddhism. The Japanese scholars are familiar with the Lexicon, as later it was compiled in Japan in four languages, Japanese, Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese. The work started by Vassilyev was extremely difficult; it demanded excellent knowledge of Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist literature. It was especially difficult to work with Chinese sources, as every translator tended to translate identical words in different ways. However, Vassilyev almost finished that work. It has already been mentioned that the two volumes are presently kept in the Archives of the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg, and we can only regret that the Lexicon has remained unpublished.

The same Archives contain more manuscripts by Vassilyev: "Essays of Buddhist Dogma" (449 typewritten pages), "A review of Buddhist writing system" (253

⁴ *Journal of the Ministry of People's Education*, 1904, p. 107.

⁵ S. F. Oldenburg, "In memoriam of V. P. Vassilyev, Obituary".

⁶ *Ibid.* The obituary written by S. F. Oldenburg contained a lot of quotes by Vassilyev himself and by those foreign scholars who had written about his input.

⁷ A Tanjur of the Chinese edition, section "do 'grel", vol. "go", ff. 2046-3110. *The Tibetan Tripiṭaka* / Pekin ed. 1962, No. 5832.

typewritten pages), "Notes for the reading book in Tibetan" (335 typewritten pages).

Vassilyev also left behind a lot of practical studies, maps, manuals, and papers. For instance, he was the first researcher in Peking who printed a large map of Chinese lands (in Chinese) listing all names under which those lands had been known in the times of all twelve dynasties. In the *Journal of the Ministry of People's Education*, he published a few papers on central asian geography. In 1852, there appeared his note "Central Asia and the main mountain chains in the Chinese region". In 1857, the *Proceeding of the Geographical Society* printed his papers on Manchuria, "Description of Manchuria", "Note about Ningut", "On the influxes of the Amur", and "On a volcano in Manchuria". In 1862, the same journal published several articles, also by him, in which he provided the first ever information on the ancient nations once (during the Yuang and Min epochs) inhabiting Central Asia according to Chinese sources: the Kidangs, the Churchens, the Mongol-Tartars, the Manchurians. He provided important insight into the process how the Moslems moving into China. Vassilyev was interested in paleography, so he wrote about the graphical system of Chinese hieroglyphs, on the comparison of Chinese writing with other Oriental systems, and on the history of Chinese hieroglyphs. His papers were translated into other languages and received universal appreciation. Naturally, for us his most important studies are those in the field of religion, especially the sequence "Oriental religions: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism". Vassilyev had completed his work on "Buddhist Lexicon" and even addressed the Government requesting the permission to publish it, but it regretfully happened too late, just few weeks before he died. In the present, we have a single publication of a fragment of his Tibetan-Russian dictionary, a study which was and still continues to be of tremendous importance. It is by no chance that Vassilyev's successors, F. I. Shcherbatskoy, S. F. Oldenburg, O. Obermiller continued his work. Nowadays, that direction became the primary one for E. P. Ostrovskaya and V. I. Rudoy.

One should not fail to note other works by Vassilyev. For the students of the Kazan University, he wrote "Manchurian-Russian dictionary" (1866), "Analysis of Chinese hieroglyphs" (1866), "Essential reading in Chinese" (1867), "An attempt to compile the first Chinese-Russian dictionary". He also translated Chinese classics. Having moved to St. Petersburg, he lectured on "The history of Chinese literature".

Vassilyev was neither a Westerner, nor a Slavophil. The rumors saying that he was among those who shouted about the "yellow menace" were greatly exaggerated. However, he naturally could never forget the pain of those ten difficult years during which he had stayed with the Russian mission in Peking. Those reminiscences, probably, had resulted in the rumors concerning his anti-Chinese mood.

In 1851-1852, Vassilyev wrote curriculum of studying Chinese and Manchurian. He wrote the following about the necessity to study China and its culture, "Can it be so that that land ... that nation heading its own way through millennia would not deserve our attention? ... Some people think that having studied Greek and Roman history supplemented with stories of subsequent periods we presently know everything there is to know; however we do not. We know something about a half of the mankind while the other half remains hidden behind a heavy curtain..."

In 1856, Vassilyev published his original system of studying Chinese writing and suggested that the Academy of Sciences would publish a Chinese dictionary compiled in

accordance with that system. In 1867, that dictionary was lithographed.⁸

Most of Vassilyev's archives he brought over from China have been lost. In all probability, forever.

⁸ V. P. Vassilyev. "The graphical system of Chinese hieroglyphs", *Journal of the Ministry of People's Education*, 1856, part 92, pp. 333-358. *An approach towards the first Chinese-Russian dictionary*. St. Petersburg, 1867 (lithograph).